



History of the Caribbean: Plantations, Trade, and War in the Atlantic World

By Frank Moya Pons

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From the arrival of the first Europeans in the region until the 1930s, plantations brought unprecedented wealth to Old World owners and led to bloody wars. This text explores the history, context and consequences of the major changes that marked the Caribbean between Columbus' initial landing and the Great Depression.

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Editorial Review

Review

Moya Pons, Dominican Republic historian, argues that the European demand for primary products such as ginger, salt, cacao, tobacco, and especially sugar brought the Caribbean islands into the Atlantic world and the global system as a "homogeneous economic unit." Like other economic historians, he stresses the functional unity of the region because the islands shared the experience of plantation economies and slave labor. However, a social or political historian might argue that while the sugar revolution did give the islands similar ties to the Atlantic world, it did not integrate the region or its population. The book concludes in 1930, when the devastating effects of the Great Depression shattered what was left of the centuries-old plantation economy. Except for Cuba, however, the rise of sugar beets and the demise of slavery had already weakened the sugar islands and their Atlantic trade a century earlier. Moya Pons's clear, cogent summary of Caribbean economic history, with an outstanding bibliographic essay, is no small achievement, but it will hardly be the last word for those who seek to understand the region. Summing Up: Highly recommended. All levels/libraries. -- *Choice Magazine*

New West Indian Guide vol 83 2009 "Frank Moya Pons, the authority on the history of the Dominican Republic, has written a classic. In *History of the Caribbean*, he uses the development of sugar plantation economies and societies to discuss the shared experiences of the Caribbean islands before 1930. Despite diverse colonialisms and cultures, he considers sugar plantations as central to the Caribbean region and to the development of capitalism in the Atlantic world. Although the sugar economy rose and fell in different islands at different times, a similar pattern developed, involving capital-intensive sugar plantations, exploitation of enslaved and indentured labor, abolition of slavery, the emergence of peasantries and proletarians, and the rise of big American sugar. This is not a new idea but Moya Pons treats us to a thorough survey of developments in the whole Caribbean mosaic, is a great strength. So too is the exhaustive bibliographical essay at the rear of the book.

The story begins with the Spanish occupation of the Antilles and the demographic collapse of Native American peoples. Shortages of indigenous labor led to the introduction of enslaved Africans first for gold mining, then for sugar cane cultivation. Experiments with sugar production began in Hispaniola as early as 1506; the first sugar shipment went to Spain in 1521. The age of Caribbean sugar and slavery had begun. From the outset enslaved peoples resisted with insurrection and marronage.

Sugar exports from Hispaniola and Puerto Rico declined sharply after about 1584 due to Brazilian competition. Ginger, a high-value crop characterized by relative ease of production and shipping, became favored. Cattle were also important for fresh meat, jerky, and hides.

Despite Spanish efforts to retain a trade monopoly with the Antilles, Dutch, French, and English vessels traded with Spanish settlers. North Europeans occupied islands in the Lesser Antilles and soon switched from tobacco to sugar. A "sugar revolution" began. Barbados, first off the mark, was by 1655 "the most densely populated area in the New World" (p. 59) with 23,000 Europeans and 20,000 slaves. Moya Pons details the significance of Dutch expertise in this transformation. Jamaica (taken from Spain in the 1650s) outperformed Barbados after 1720. During the 1700s sugar production in the French colonies of St. Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe expanded. French sugar dominated the continental European market.

Eighteenth-century wars transformed the economic and political map of the Caribbean. Neutral ports of the Dutch and Danes thrived during wartime. At the end of the Seven Years' War/French and Indian War (1763), Britain gained the "ceded islands" of Grenada, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Tobago where new sugar frontiers developed. The American Revolutionary Wars, which saw Britain face American colonists (1776), France (1778), Spain (1779), and the Netherlands (1780), were hard on the Anglo Caribbean, where supply costs increased, shortages followed, and mortality rose.

The Haitian Revolution is covered in Chapter 11, "The French Revolution in the Antilles." In just over twenty pages, Moya Pons unravels the complex story succinctly. His deep knowledge of the interconnected histories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic is a great asset here and throughout the book.

Partly inspired by events in Haiti, the British government moved to prohibit the slave trade (1807-1808) and later abolish slavery (1833-1834). British planters (and later the French) had to grow sugar without slaves. The sugar industry was saved by indentured labor (mainly from India and China) and modernization. The French planters, facing competition from beet growers in France, were the first to introduce steam-powered centrales. Moya Pons details this technological shift as a regional process, something not done elsewhere in the literature.'-- NWIG (New West Indian Guide vol.83 ,2009 --New West Indian Guide

"This is a scholarly but, thank goodness, an extremely well-written book. Its author, Professor Frank Moya Pons, is recognized as the 'most widely read historian of the Dominican Republic.' Deeply steeped in the history of the Caribbean, his love for the region is quite evident. This comprehensive book covers more than 400 years of Caribbean adventures and misadventures, from Columbus' first trip to the region to the 1930s. Moya Pons stops his analysis at the Great Depression because he feels the economy and realities of the area changed forever at that time. Moya Pons captures the excitement and anguish of those centuries while providing his readers unusual insight. His Caribbean encompasses all the myriad islands that so many bathe in romanticism. Given their present relative well-being, it is hard to fathom how harsh life was--first for slaves and later for indentured servants and strapped emigrants. Fortunes made off their backs were enjoyed by a small European elite. Columbus stumbled upon the Caribbean while seeking a waterway to the Far East. He thought he was near India and thus dubbed the natives of the Caribbean 'Indians.' Unfortunately, these gentle people were quickly enslaved by the Spanish and forced to work in existing gold mines. Within a very few decades, virtually all of them had died. The Spanish weren't about to allow that to end their profitable exploitation. So they turned the Caribbean into a thriving home base for the African slave trade. Trade in human flesh would continue for hundreds of years in the Caribbean. It was an extended enterprise, with some large plantations harboring upwards of 900 Black slaves. Later slavery was extended to other parts of Latin America and the United States. Given cheap labor and a fertile natural world, the Caribbean blossomed, creating gargantuan profits. The millions of slaves who made that possible did not benefit from the prosperity their labor produced. Further, they and their descendants suffered inordinately during the bad times. The Spanish were joined and abetted by English, Dutch, French and other interests. They were motivated by financial profit tinged with national pride. The stage was set for the international intrigue and competing European nationalistic ambitions so well covered in this book. Further European wars, the American and the French revolutions thousands of miles away--all had significant repercussions in the Caribbean and its development. An underlying theme of this book is the importance of 'the evolution of sugar plantations as the dominant integrating force of Caribbean economic history.' The economies of ever so many islands became very similar, despite linguistic, political and ecological variations. Sugar plantations, established in most islands, dominated the region's economy. The Caribbean became, as Moya Pons artfully writes, 'the most important supplier of sucrose, an efficient source of calories that, once tasted, the modern world could not live without.' Ironically, the New World, which gave the old so many new products such as tomatoes, potatoes and tobacco, to name a few, did not give it sugar. Sugar was introduced to the Caribbean by Columbus during his second trip in 1493. Those shoots from the Canary Islands would lay the foundation for an industry, a lifestyle that would spread out and permeate the entire Caribbean. Dutch investors provided

much of the financing to establish the early sugar plantations while Great Britain and France became the principal purveyors of slaves. Later, tobacco would become a large cash crop as well. Once again, those labor-intensive plantations would have never succeeded without a massive slave population. The British became involved in the tobacco business in the early 1600s. First cultivated to provide snuff, by the 1700s the British and the Dutch had made smoking tobacco, typically in pipes, fashionable throughout Europe. We cannot read of the Caribbean without remembering boyhood tales of pirates, buccaneers and swashbuckling adventurers. Moya Pons provides us with a more accurate historical reality of those characters than the one churned out by Hollywood. Fascinating, nonetheless, particularly as one appreciates the important role they played in the area's economies. Detailed vignettes of each island's local history and how they all melded together make this book different from other treatments. One senses Moya Pons sees the Caribbean as a single pulsating organism. The book's references are excellent. Chapter citations together with an extensive Caribbean bibliography are a testament to Moya Pons' scholarship and erudition. They not only strengthen and enhance this book they also remain viable and sound reference points for further study. In short, a very good read, historically sound, fact-laden and well written. I literally could not put it down until I finished it."

--Hispanic Outlook

"In this clearly written and comprehensive narrative, Frank Moya Pons provides an alternative to fragmented national histories and monographic local approaches to the Caribbean by presenting an encompassing narrative that treats the region as a unified whole. He is particularly successful in integrating the histories of the Hispanic and non-Hispanic Caribbean, which all too often fall into separate historiographies. Sugar provides the thread that integrates the region's economic, social, and demographic history across space and over time. However, Moya Pons does not examine either sugar or the Caribbean from a narrowly economic point of view but rather treats them as the focus of international political rivalry, war, and diplomacy. From this perspective, he reconstructs the ways in which the unifying element of the sugar plantation produced the economic, social, and demographic diversity that characterizes the region. The book begins with an account of the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean. The early chapters are especially interesting because they put Spanish activities in Hispaniola at the center of Spain's early colonization efforts, in contrast to more general histories that emphasize the conquest and colonization of Mexico and Peru. Gold, not sugar, was the focus of Spain's initial efforts in the Caribbean. Sugar production emerged in the 1520s only as an alternative to the rapidly depleted mining industry. However, despite its early appearance, the Spanish experiment with sugar was not the beginning of the Caribbean's long and fateful association with sugar. The early Spanish sugar industry was relatively successful, but the quantities produced were low. Technology and specialists in sugar refining were imported from the Mediterranean and Atlantic sugar industry, while the workforce was comprised of surviving encomienda Indians, whose diminished numbers were supplemented by imported African slaves. By the 1580s, the Spanish Caribbean sugar was surpassed by the Portuguese colonies of Sao Tome and Brazil. With the decline of sugar and the breakdown of trade routes, the Spanish Caribbean entered a cycle of economic decline and demographic crisis. The rural population increasingly engaged in contraband in cattle and hides with assorted English, French, Dutch, and Portuguese privateers, traders, and smugglers. In order to suppress this activity, the Spanish authorities removed the population from northern and western Hispaniola. This disastrous policy left not only feral cattle, but also large tracts of domesticated land available to foreign interlopers. Spanish policy also encouraged flight into the interior, creating an impoverished subsistence peasantry of mixed physical and cultural origins anxious to escape control and taxation of the central authority. Moya Pons emphasizes the role of pirates, privateers, smugglers, and traders together with interstate conflict in breaking Spain's monopoly of political power in the Caribbean and establishing English, French, and Dutch sovereignty over the islands of the eastern Caribbean as well as Jamaica and western Hispaniola. Moya Pons carefully analyzes the evolution of these islands from pirate havens to tobacco-planting colonies with dependent European labor forces. Sugar production was definitively established when, upon their expulsion from Brazil, the Dutch brought sugar, slaves, new technologies, credit, and access to markets to Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. The sugar plantation

and large-scale importation of African slaves marginalized or displaced European smallholders and tobacco cultivation in British and French colonies and created the first Caribbean "sugar islands." By the 1740s, the large islands of Saint Domingue and Jamaica became the epicenters of sugar production. Sugar became the most valuable commodity in international trade, and the sugar economies of the British and French Caribbean expanded continuously over the next century, creating slave societies with black majorities. Moya Pons draws attention to the importance of war and imperial politics in creating conditions for the expansion of the sugar industry. Britain and France effectively eliminated the Dutch power in the Caribbean through war and the imposition of mercantilist policies. From the Seven Years' War (1756-63) until the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815), Britain and France contended with one another for imperial domination of the Caribbean and North America. This was the period of most rapid growth of the Caribbean sugar industry, and there was marked tension between unprecedented economic expansion and metropolitan control over the colonial economies. United States independence disrupted the organization of Britain's mercantilist economy in the Americas while the Haitian Revolution ended France's colonial ambitions in the New World. The revolution in Haiti abolished slavery, destroyed the plantation system, and created a black peasantry that had to confront the exactions of the newly independent state in the context of isolation from the global economy. In the British Caribbean, abolitionism ended the slave trade. Many of the older colonies declined but new ones were added to the empire. With emancipation, many former slaves established themselves as smallholding peasants, while in the new colonies, especially Trinidad and Guiana, indentured Asian labor was imported to sustain the growth of the sugar industry. Reconstituted peasantries and rural working classes formed the majority in these post-emancipation societies. During the first half of the nineteenth century, sugar production increased in Puerto Rico and especially Cuba. Cuba took advantage of the void created by the destruction of the Saint Domingue sugar industry and emerged as the world's leading producer by the 1830s. Sugar production was mechanized during this period and Cuba was best able to take advantage of the new technologies. Despite the disruptions of the Ten Years' War, Cuban sugar production continued to increase. Nonetheless there was mounting pressure from various sources on the illegal slave trade and slavery itself. By emancipating children and the elderly, the Moret Law of 1869 limited the growth of the slave population in the sugar zones. The Patronage Law of 1880 attempted to guarantee the labor supply by instituting a system of apprenticeship and gradual emancipation, but accelerated the dissolution of slavery. The era of independent plantations ended with the abolition of slavery in 1886. Planters throughout the Caribbean began to establish centralized sugar mills and to experiment with new labor arrangements in the face of growing world competition. Moya Pons concludes the book by analyzing the construction of the American sugar empire. U.S. intervention in the Cuban War of Independence in 1898 initiated a new cycle of expansion of the Caribbean sugar economy. The United States seized control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic and imposed a different political status on each. Intervention opened the way for massive American investment, unprecedented expansion of production, and the formation of giant sugar centrales across the region. Sugar production in the Spanish Caribbean was integrated into the U.S. market under the control of the American "Sugar Trust." This restructuring of the Caribbean sugar industry was linked to complex processes of regional and international migration, proletarianization, peasant and middle-class formation, and development of new tropical exports such as bananas, coffee, and tobacco; and contributed to the further development of social, cultural, and political complexity that characterizes the Caribbean region."---HAHR 2010 --Hispanic American Historical Review

Choice: "Moya Pons, Dominican Republic historian, argues that the European demand for primary products such as ginger, salt, cacao, tobacco, and especially sugar brought the Caribbean islands into the Atlantic world and the global system as a 'homogeneous economic unit.' Like other economic historians, he stresses the functional unity of the region because the islands shared the experience of plantation economies and slave labor. However, a social or political historian might argue that while the sugar revolution did give the islands similar ties to the Atlantic world, it did not integrate the region or its population. The book concludes in 1930, when the devastating effects of the Great Depression shattered what was left of the centuries-old

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